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ABSTRACT

This Digest reviews the literature on recent attempts to incorporate technology into the instruction of journalism and mass communication. It first discusses the four main categories of current technology use in journalism and mass communication: classroom instruction; online syllabi/materials; distance learning; and technological literacy. It then addresses how journalism and mass communication educators have attempted to incorporate the teaching of technological literacy into existing curricula. It concludes that the general ideas driving technology use in journalism schools seem to be ones of incorporation and inclusion--across content, majors, and disciplines. (Contains 13 references.) (RS)

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Mass Communication: Technology Use and Instruction

by Shawna Brynildssen

There are a number of compelling reasons for incorporating technology into the instruction of journalism and mass communication. As technology plays an increasingly important role in our lives, it becomes vital to expose journalism students to that technology. Some scholars have gone so far as to state that any journalism school that does not assimilate new technology is ignoring the facts of the rapidly changing environment (Singer, Craig, Allen, Whitehouse, Dimitrova, & Sanders, 1996).

And indeed, new technology is heavily used throughout the journalism and mass communication industry (Bowen & Durbin, 2001). With newspapers across the country producing online versions, and television stations broadcasting programs using high-definition images, it seems irrational for journalism schools not to follow what practitioners are employing. In fact, according to some researchers, the very nature of journalism requires its educators to take a proactive approach to using technology in instruction. Sutherland (2001) posits that because it is the job of journalists to stay on the cutting edge, journalism schools should be "pioneers" in using the new technology.

There is another practical reason why journalism and mass communication educators want to use new technology: because it is cost effective (Huesca, 2000). However, it may cost more at the beginning when all the channels and equipments are not fully established.

Current Technology Use

To date, the uses of new technology in the teaching of journalism and mass communication education can be broken into four main categories: 1) class instruction, 2) online syllabi/materials, 3) distance learning/online courses, and 4) technological literacy (knowledge and skills of new media technologies) within the curriculum.

1. ***Class instruction.*** Computer-assisted and multimedia instruction are commonly used in American college and university classrooms (Hester, 1999). More and more classrooms are being designed—or retrofitted—with multimedia equipment that allows teachers to combine video, audio, and electronic text in their instruction. Computer-assisted and multimedia instruction is particularly beneficial for journalism and mass communication educators; it can contribute to student engagement and success in skill courses, such as news writing and copyediting. Students rated a computer writing program higher than a paper exercise, while teachers reported that students made great improvement in grammar by using computerized writing tools (Smith, 1990).
2. ***Online syllabi/materials.*** New technology allows teachers to create content and post course information online. Online syllabi are the most widely used teaching tool among college professors. In addition to course syllabi, teachers can put post-class notes, reading materials, assignments, class discussions, student works, tests, grades, and other items that are not easy for students to access in traditional syllabi. In view of this advantage, many universities are developing school-wide systems that offer a website for each course offered.
3. ***Distance learning.*** The virtual classroom is not yet used to its full potential by journalism and mass communication schools. Although some schools offer online courses that allow students not to meet in class, many still require students to live near campus (Arant, 1996). Distance education is still in the trial process, largely because of instruction methods. The major hurdle is not the technology infrastructure, but having effective instruction without a classroom setting (Arant, 1996).
4. ***Technological literacy.*** Panici (1998) describes technological literacy as "understanding both the why and how of new media communication tools." This goes beyond pure technological skills, which are relatively easy to obtain, to encompass critical thinking skills and key issues surrounding the new technology—issues such as privacy, intellectual property, and assessing source reliability. Pavlik (2003) notes that there is

> . . . something much deeper and more important that our students need to learn in the context of new media, something that goes well beyond the qualities of craft and skill. They need to learn about the ways digital technologies are quietly—and not-so-quietly—transforming the world. (p. 314)

Rethinking Curriculum

Initially, many journalism and mass communication educators attempted to incorporate the teaching of technological literacy into existing curricula (Gunaratne & Lee, 1996). However, it is difficult to cover all issues relating to the new technology in existing courses. Consequently, in the 1990s, the curricula of journalism and mass communication schools began to undergo a transformation, which has only accelerated. A growing number of schools began to offer new programs and courses that dealt directly with new media, such as online journalism and computer-assisted reporting.

Some schools took a more basic approach, restructuring their existing courses and degree programs.

Although some schools initially treated online mass communication as a separate track in their undergraduate curriculum (Dennis, Meyer, Shyam, Pryor, Roger, Chen, et al., 2003), most experts argue against this segregation of "new" and "traditional" technology. In fact, according to Nicholson (2001), some of the more advanced journalism schools are not only teaching online and traditional journalism in the same major—they are actually redesigning their curriculum to merge content that has historically been taught in separate courses. For example, the School of Journalism and Mass Communication at the University of Kansas recently combined six undergraduate tracks into two: 1) news/information (news, editorial, broadcast, and magazine journalism) and 2) strategic communication (management, marketing, advertising, and PR). Similarly, Emerson College in Boston now has its broadcast and print journalism student taking the same introductory courses and capstone courses. The goal of these mergers is to broaden the skill base of journalism graduate and better prepare them for the new, multimedia nature of mass communication.

A second trend in curriculum change is toward practical, hands-on training. Numerous schools are developing multimedia labs, online magazines, and digital newsrooms—all of which expose students to technologies, practices, environments that mimic those they will encounter in their professional lives (Nicholson, 2001). Pryor (2003) emphasizes the importance of this kind of technical, nuts-and-bolts training, noting that the publishing of electronic content is inextricably linked to its creation.

As journalism educators rethink curriculum, a number of them are reaching out to other disciplines. According to Smith (1990), as professors have seen the need of acquiring new knowledge and techniques of new media themselves, administrators have responded by hiring new faculty from computer or information science departments. Pryor (2003) argues that this sort of interdisciplinary approach is critical to the future success of journalism education: "On campus, journalism educators will have to make room for new disciplines and build bridges to schools of engineering, design, cinema-TV, business, philosophy, linguistics, psychology, and elsewhere."

Conclusion

The general ideas driving technology use in journalism schools seem to be ones of incorporation and inclusion—across content, majors, and disciplines. By broadening their categories and integrating the new with the traditional, educators better prepare journalism students for both a workplace and a world that are being reshaped by technology.

Shawna Brynildssen received a BA in English from Hanover College, Hanover, Indiana in 1988. She is a freelance writer and editor located in Bloomington, Indiana.

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